



Student Veterans of America
1012 14th Street NW, Suite 1200
Washington, DC 20005
www.studentveterans.org

TESTIMONY OF
MR. WILLIAM HUBBARD
VICE PRESIDENT OF GOVERNMENT AFFAIRS
STUDENT VETERANS OF AMERICA

BEFORE THE

SUBCOMMITTEE ON ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY
OF THE
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

LEGISLATIVE HEARING ON THE TOPIC OF:
"AN UPDATE ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE FOREVER GI BILL"

DECEMBER 12, 2017



Chairman Arrington, Ranking Member O'Rourke and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for inviting Student Veterans of America (SVA) to submit our testimony on the modernization of the GI Bill and other pending legislation. With nearly 1,500 chapters representing over 1.1 million student veterans in schools across the country, we are pleased to share the perspective of those directly impacted by the subjects before this committee.

Established in 2008, SVA has grown to become a force and voice for the interests of veterans in higher education. With a myriad of programs supporting their success, rigorous research on ways to improve the landscape, and advocacy throughout the nation, we place the student veteran at the top of our organizational pyramid. As the future leaders of this country, fostering the success of veterans in school is paramount in their preparation for productive and impactful lives following service in the military.

○

Signed into law on August 16th, 2017, H.R. 3218—commonly known as the Forever GI Bill—made history^{1, 2}. As one of the most significant pieces of higher education legislation to occur this century, millions of service-affiliated students will have greater access to education and training thanks to the efforts of this committee and the 115th Congress. We would like to share some brief history and intent of the legislation from our perspective, which was truly a case-study in partnership and bipartisan discussion. In 2016, Student Veterans of America recognized the importance of sustainability in programs driven by outcomes, and fueled with data-driven decision-making.

Last year, we saw that it was time to stop playing defense against budget threats on the GI Bill, and instead to protect it for all generations of veterans to come. We acknowledge that student veterans are among the most successful students in higher education today. Based on our research, the *National Veteran Education Success Tracker* (NVEST)³, we demonstrated that the investment our country is making in the education of veterans has an incredible impact on all service-affiliated students, as well as the nation's ability to maintain global leadership.

The Forever GI Bill includes dozens of solution-oriented provisions such as work-study authorization; science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) scholarships; removal of the time limit; and many others which increase access to education. The new law also addresses inequities of this earned benefit and looks forward to the future well beyond our own generation. We are proud to have played a part in advocating for its passage. We have entered a new era of education for veterans—one where we no longer consider the GI Bill as a “cost of war”, but more powerfully a right of service.

The bill was frequently referred to as one of the most bipartisan pieces of legislation ever to pass through congress, both in co-sponsorship and votes, as well as formulation and negotiated text. We also must acknowledge a special thanks to the following organizations that composed the “Tiger Team” who worked closely with the Veterans Affairs Committees in making the passage of this bill a reality: Veterans of Foreign Wars, American Legion, Vietnam Veterans of America, Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors, Got Your 6, and the Military Order of the Purple Heart.

¹ 115th Congress (2017). HR 3218, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/3218>

² Gross, Natalie (2017). Military Times. “Trump signed the ‘Forever GI Bill.’ Here are 11 things you should know”, <https://www.militarytimes.com/education-transition/education/2017/08/16/trump-signed-the-forever-gi-bill-here-are-11-things-you-should-know/>

³ Cate, C. A., Lyon, J. S., Schmeling, J., & Bogue, B. Y. (2017). *National Veteran Education Success Tracker: A report on the academic success of student-veterans using the Post-9/11 GI Bill*. Washington, D.C.



As leading advocates for the bill, we are committed to the complete and timely implementation of the law. With that interest in mind, we thank the committee for this opportunity to highlight several key areas of success, as well as some areas with room for improvement. We applaud the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and their dedicated staff for demonstrating great initiative in implementing the Forever GI Bill, especially their very public communications effort to make those affected aware of upcoming opportunities.

- **Prior Gaps in Access.** There were several key components of the Forever GI Bill aimed at addressing critical gaps in education benefits for those who earned them, but were not eligible due to various bureaucratic nuances. Four populations were identified that required specific changes to address these gaps, including Purple Heart recipients, Fry Scholarship recipients, National Guard and reserve members with 12304b orders, and students of closed schools.

We anticipate coordination between the Department of Defense (DoD) and VA on exchanging a database of Purple Heart recipients to be cross-referenced with current GI Bill eligibility, with a targeted communications effort to follow. We maintain concern over the validity of the contact information for those affected, and encourage VA to work closely with the Military Order of the Purple Heart—also an original Tiger Team member—in messaging this new change⁴.

Two commonsense solutions in the law include affording Fry Scholarship recipients access the Yellow Ribbon Program and benefits eligibility for National Guard and reserve members who served under 12340b orders. In both instances, a change to the IT rules may be necessary, though we anticipate some manual processing of these individual cases. We strongly encourage VA to consider automating these benefits to avoid any delays once the changes go into effect by August 1, 2018.

Until Forever GI Bill, student veterans attending schools with unexpected closures were the only students in higher education with no reasonable recourse to recoup their benefits. The most prolific examples included the closure of the Corinthian Colleges and ITT Tech^{5, 6}. Unfortunately, thousands of student veterans were adversely affected due to the poor performance of these schools, and we applaud VA for producing an application for these students to apply for restoration of their benefits.

We are concerned that so few students have applied for the restoration of benefits under the school closure provision since the notice from VA went live to these students⁷. Similar to our concerns with reaching eligible Purple Heart recipients, the integrity of contact information within the VA system may not be reliable. We encourage VA to partner with external organizations such as Student Veterans of America and others to reach the widest audience possible.

- **Edith Nourse Rogers STEM Scholarship.** This provision originated from H.R. 5784 in the 113th congress, the GI Bill STEM Extension Act, a bipartisan bill co-sponsored by Rep. David McKinley (WV-1) and Rep. Dina Titus (NV-1).⁸ We were a proud partner in the formulation and advocacy of this effort, and are pleased to see it as a law. At present, the implementation of this provision is unknown, despite being

⁴ Military Order of the Purple Heart, <http://www.purpleheart.org/Mission.aspx>

⁵ Hefling, Kimberly. POLITICO, (2015). "Vets snared in for-profit college collapse want GI Bill money back". <https://www.politico.com/story/2015/07/veterans-gi-bill-for-profit-colleges-119697>

⁶ Absher, Jim. Military.Com (2016). "ITT Tech Closes All Campuses, Affecting Nearly 7,000 Veterans". <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2016/09/06/itt-tech-closes-all-campuses-affecting-nearly-7000-veterans.html>

⁷ VA estimates that approximately 250 of the roughly 7,000 potentially affected students have applied to have their benefits restored.

⁸ 113th Congress (2014). H.R. 5784, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/113th-congress/house-bill/5784/cosponsors>



one of the most high-profile provisions. Student veterans consistently cite this as a component of Forever GI Bill with which they have the greatest interest.

We encourage this committee to pay special attention to the implementation of this provision, as it represents one of the most significant contiguous investment of resources in the new law. Additionally, the long-term return on investment of this provision has the potential to impact our country's overall national security posture, with STEM-educated professionals needed now more than ever.⁹

- **Modernizing Through Innovation.** We worked closely with House Majority Leader, Rep. Kevin McCarthy (CA-23) and his office to support the inclusion of this provision. Today, higher education as an industry is not reacting to the changes in modern technology, and adapting to a new generation of students which are a majority non-traditional learners. Some sectors of the industry have adapted quicker than others, while many schools lag behind.

This provision represents a recognition that innovation in higher education must be in concert with new technologies, and with a focus on the future economy. We anticipate VA publishing a solicitation for bids to contract the education providers afforded under this provision. We offer our support to VA on the development of criteria to determine the selection of those contractors, noting the potential for bad actors to have a high interest in participating in this program. We encourage VA to identify rigorous standards that prevent poor quality providers from participating.

- **One GI Bill for All Generations.** When we first conceived of the idea of one GI Bill for all future generations of veterans, we did it with the intent of protecting the long-term viability of the program. We heavily encourage this committee and congress to make data-driven decisions based on the return on investment of all government programs. From the original implementation of the Post-9/11 GI Bill to-date, student veterans have demonstrated that they are some of the most high-performing students in higher education today, highlighted by their record 72% success rate.¹⁰

One of the first organizations we approached with the concept of the Forever GI Bill was Vietnam Veterans of America, who's core motto, "Never again will one generation of veterans abandon another" resonating strongly with us.¹¹ We believe the removal of the 15-year limit helps to secure this benefit for future generations, and encourage VA to require all outgoing Certificates of Eligibility (CoE) to reflect the removal of the delimiting date. No veteran should receive a certificate with a time limit on their benefits if they are eligible for the "Forever" provision.

- **Overall Implementation Concerns.** As the Forever GI Bill was being developed, it became increasingly clear that implementation costs, particularly IT changes and upgrades, would be a significant driver of cost. We applaud Rep. Gus Bilirakis for proposing the inclusion of a \$30 million authorization for VA to make the necessary changes.¹² More recent estimates for the full implementation of the law are approximately \$70 million¹³. We have major concerns on whether or not the offices implementing this law are receiving adequate resources to execute this overhaul.

⁹ Coleman, Kevin. C4ISRnet (2017), "Is the STEM shortage a national security issue?". <https://www.c4isrnet.com/opinion/the-compass/net-defense-blogs/2017/04/17/is-the-stem-shortage-a-national-security-issue/>

¹⁰ Cate, C. A., Lyon, J. S., Schmeling, J., & Bogue, B. Y. (2017). National Veteran Education Success Tracker: A report on the academic success of student-veterans using the Post-9/11 GI Bill. Washington, D.C.

¹¹ Vietnam Veterans of America, <https://vva.org/who-we-are/about-us-history/>

¹² 115th Congress (2017). H.R. 1994, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/1994>

¹³ Estimated total cost of implementation based on discussions with senior VA officials.



As a function of VA's structure, the IT budget is a single consolidated resource, often leaving comparatively smaller programs without the resources needed to serve their customers as effectively as they desire. This highlights a long-standing challenge in maintaining the Office of Economic Opportunity under the Veterans Benefits Administration, and is worth consideration for an Under Secretary-level representation within VA. Our major interest is in avoiding processing and payment delays similar to those that occurred in 2009, and we look forward to working with VA and this committee on supporting timely implementation of this law.

The Forever GI Bill represents a significant shift in education for veterans, and in higher education in general. More important than inputs and outputs are outcomes—that is more apparent today than ever; the GI Bill is an American success story because it has demonstrated results. As President Thomas Jefferson said in 1808, “The same prudence which in private life would forbid our paying our own money for unexplained projects, forbids it in the dispensation of the public moneys.”¹⁴

In some instances, such as the high cost of low quality flight schools, those outcomes have come into question.¹⁵ While many flight schools deliver high quality programs, several predatory programs have used the contract loophole to exploit veterans for their GI Bill tuition. With the implementation of Forever GI Bill, we raise the question, “who should be allowed to play in GI Bill land?”; consider the precedent of the VA home loan program—many banks do not qualify for these loans due to the rigorous and strict standards, leading to outcomes impressive by any standard.

Furthermore, there have been schools with poor outcomes declared unapproved by State Approving Agencies such as Ashford University.¹⁶ The measure of whether or not schools should be allowed to participate in this GI Bill of the future should be outcomes. Student veterans view approval for VA funding as a declaration of academic quality, which it presently is not. We respectfully request that this committee host an informal roundtable discussion on several of these topics identified in this testimony early in 2018. We would hope to address several of our concerns in greater detail, with the opportunity to further research some of the topics identified in this hearing.

○

We thank the Chairman, Ranking Member, and the Committee members for your time, attention, and devotion to the cause of veterans in higher education. As always, we welcome your feedback and questions, and we look forward to continuing to work with this committee, the House Veterans' Affairs Committee, and the entire congress to ensure the success of all generations of veterans through education.

¹⁴ Washington, Henry. (1859) Joint Committee of Congress on the Library, “The Writings of Thomas Jefferson: Correspondence”. Pg 301, <https://play.google.com/books/reader?printsec=frontcover&output=reader&id=RixNn3jblSYC&pg=GBS.PR1>

¹⁵ Haress, Chris. (2016), International Business Times. <http://www.ibtimes.com/gi-bill-flight-school-benefits-could-be-slashed-congress-amid-tuition-loophole-2294612>

¹⁶ Halperin, David. (2017), HuffPost. “Bridgepoint SEC Filing Raises Questions About Continued Federal Funding”. https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/bridgepoint-sec-filing-raises-questions-about-continued_us_5a0b3a78e4b06d8966cf3318



Information Required by Rule XI2(g)(4) of the House of Representatives

Pursuant to Rule XI2(g)(4) of the House of Representatives, SVA has not received any federal grants in Fiscal Year 2018, nor has it received any federal grants in the two previous Fiscal Years.



William Hubbard, Vice President of Government Affairs



Will Hubbard joined the professional staff of Student Veterans of America in February 2014. Mr. Hubbard is frequently called to testify to Congress on a variety of topics related to higher education and veterans. He also regularly advises the White House and senior executives of the Administration on the interests of student veterans and higher education policy.

Mr. Hubbard received his Bachelors in International Studies from American University. After graduating, he spent several years serving government agencies to include the Department of the Navy, Department of State, and the State of Indiana Department of Revenue in his role as a Federal Strategy and Operations Consultant.

As a National Executive Committee Member of Deloitte's Armed Forces Business Resource Group, Mr. Hubbard was dedicated to the achievement of veterans, and led the successful proposal of two veteran-focused pro bono projects. Prior to his career in consulting, he co-founded a successful startup business in the snack food industry, which expanded placement into 14 local stores.

Most recently, Mr. Hubbard deployed to Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) to conduct force protection activities including threat assessments, review of the human terrain, and liaison with joint operations units as well as executive-level embassy personnel. The mission included operations in Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, and humanitarian assistance to Haiti in the days after Hurricane Matthew.

Mr. Hubbard joined the Marine Corps Reserve in 2006 and initially served with 2nd Battalion, 24th Marines. Today, he continues to serve at Quantico, VA, and most recently deployed to Central America with a Special Purpose Marine Air-Ground Task Force. He has served SVA at both the chapter and national levels, and has been passionate about veterans' issues since entering the armed services.